Politeness in a Foreign Language Context: a Case of Extrovert and Introvert EFL learners

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Abstract

In the present study Classroom politeness is operationally defined according to various strategies or behaviors that the students in question draw upon in reacting to different situations based on their personality type. The study explores through a survey and a discourse completion test the degree of politeness according to personality types in an Iranian context indicate to certain situations. Results show that the possible causes for the any perceived differences in 'impoliteness' between the learners with different personality types are more 'cultural' rather than that of 'impoliteness' on the part of the students. Recommendations are made for program coordinators and teachers to deal with this issue in EFL classrooms along with future needed research.
Keywords: politeness, academic classroom management, personality type

INTRODUCTION

A vast amount of research has attempted to investigate linguistic politeness in the past three or so decades; in particular, Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving view of politeness has stimulated a lot of discussion and controversy. This model employs Goffman's (1959) notion of "face" to argue that each person has two types of face: positive (esteemed self-image) and negative (desire for autonomy); any action that threatens positive or negative face is called a "face threatening act" (FTA). According to Brown and Levinson, speakers employ positive and negative politeness strategies to maintain their face during conversations. A few examples of positive politeness strategies are attending to the needs of the other person and exaggerating interest or sympathy, while negative politeness strategies include hedging, being indirect, or apologizing. Another influential scholar in the field of linguistic politeness is Geoffrey Leech (1983), who perceives politeness as a pragmatic strategy used by the speaker. His politeness principle consists of the following maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model has been challenged. Wilson, Aleman, and Leatham (1998) revise Brown and Levinson's (1987) model by suggesting that

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requesters identify potential FTAs based on rules for seeking compliance as well as specific influence goals that influence the degree of threat and potential for other FTAs. Johnson, Roloff and Riffee (2004) support Wilson et al. (1998) revision of politeness theory by examining refusals, a speech act that is not adequately addressed by Brown and Levinson, and concluding that multiple face threats are present in request and refusal situations; specifically, they maintain that there are differences in types of threat present to the requester's positive face and the refuse's face needs, depending on the obstacle underlying the refusal. Moreover, according to Xie, He and Lin (2005), Brown and Levinson's (1987) model has been shown to be theoretically reductionist, logically unsupportable and empirically dubious. Brown and Levinson's framework has also been criticized as being an "Anglo-Western" one that emphasizes individualism and that therefore may not fit certain group-oriented cultures in the East (Mao, 1994). For instance, according to Mills (2004), in many languages, such as Arabic, indirect requests are not preferred and will be viewed as impolite, mainly because they emphasize social distance, which contradicts the close social ties that characterize Arabic communities. Mills (2004) goes a step further in arguing that universality in politeness cannot be assumed since class, race, and gender may influence speakers' and listeners' use and interpretation of linguistic politeness strategies and warned that scholars may be analyzing politeness from a strictly middle class perspective. The present study sets out to investigate the degree of politeness according to personality type in an academic context based on Mills' (2004) theory.

Recent research on politeness has moved away from Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive/negative dichotomy to propose a relational and more dynamic paradigm to the study of politeness. It is now generally considered important to analyze discourse rather than merely the speaker and to take the particular community of practice into consideration in studying politeness (Locher, 2006; Locher & Watts, 2005).

In a cross-cultural study of Korean and American speakers, Hahn and Hatfield (2011) examined how the face of a third party, neither the speaker not the hearer, is managed in interactions through apology behavior. Findings revealed that even though both Koreans and Americans apologized, overall, in similar situations, there were differences regarding the specific situations in each nation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q1: Is there any relationship between politeness and extroversion personality type?

Q2: Is there any relationship between politeness and introversion personality type?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample of this study included 120 students who had registered in Azad University Ardabil Branch. Their mother tongue was Persian and Turkish. Their age ranged from 22 to 38. They came from different socio-economic backgrounds. Prior to taking part in the

research, they had studied English three years in guidance school, four years in high school.

Instruments

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

The 25 survey questions were on four classroom situations which were adapted on typical student and teacher behaviors as reported by the teachers. Students reacted to different types of behavior as described on a likert scale of 1-4 indicating least polite to most polite behavior. Alongside this was a discourse completion test (DCT) that asked a focus group of students to respond to the five situations by answering a question after each one. Ethical issues were considered through informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation in both the survey and interview.

Personality type questionnaire

The students were given the Myers-Briggs Type Indicators (MBTI) which was translated into Persian (see Appendix D). This questionnaire was used as a measure of students' personality types. The best reason to choose the MBTI instrument in order to discovering the personality type is that hundreds of studies over the past 40 years have proven the instrument to be both valid and reliable. In other words, it measures what it says it does (validity) and produces the same results when given more than once (reliability). The internal reliability level of the items is 0.77.

Procedure

Within a period of two weeks in the academic year of 2016 and 2017, 120 pre-intermediate level students based on Oxford proficiency test were selected. As expressed before, for the purpose of this study the researcher used two questionnaires: a personality type questionnaire and a discourse completion test. The study conducted at Ardabil Azad University. Then respondents were instructed to rate and finally all of questionnaires were entered into SPSS for relevant analysis.

Design

In this research, two variables were under the study. The research independent variable is politeness. Extrovert and introvert personality types can be considered as two dependent variables.

Since the purpose of this study is to discover the relationship among politeness and personality type of Iranian EFL learners, this research was correlational survey pattern. The correlational survey pattern is the research model which is aimed at determining the existence and the degree of the change between two or more variables (Gay, 1987).

RESULTS

First Null-Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between politeness and extroversion personality type.

The results of the Pearson correlation (r (108) = .586, p = .000, representing a large effect size) indicated that there was a significant relationship between politeness and extroversion personality type. Thus the first null-hypothesis was rejected.

Table 1. Pearson correlation; politeness with extroversion personality type

		Extroversion personality
	Pearson Correlation	.586**
Politeness	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	120
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

Two assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity were met. As displayed in Scatter Plot 1, the spread of dots fell around the diagonal, indicating that the relationship between politeness and extroversion personality type was linear. They also did not form a funnel shape, i.e. wide at one end and narrow at the other. These results indicated that both variables enjoyed homogenous variances – homoscedasticity.
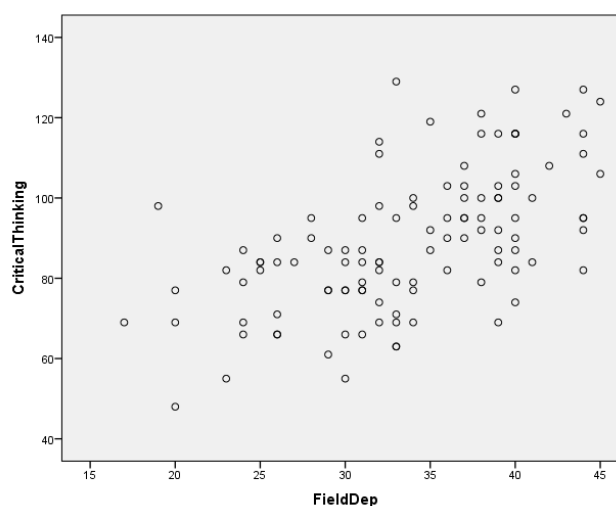

Figure 1. Relationship between Politeness and Extroversion Personality Type

Second Null-Hypothesis

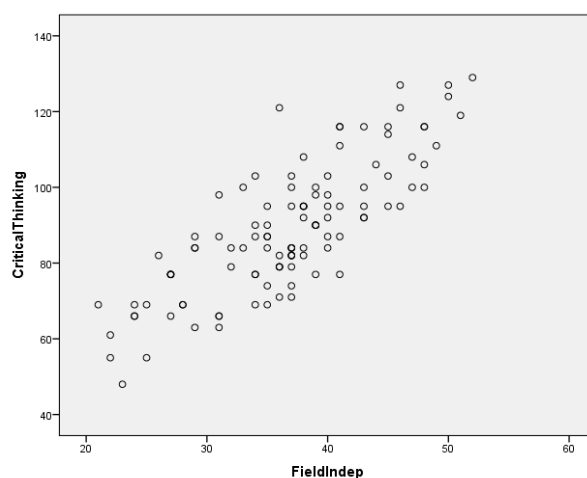There is no significant relationship between politeness and Introversion personality type.

The results of the Pearson correlation (r (108) = .806, p = .000, representing a large effect size) indicated that there was a significant relationship between politeness and introversion personality type. Thus the second null-hypothesis was rejected.

Table 4. Pearson correlation; politeness and introversion personality type

		Introversion personality
	Pearson Correlation	.806**
Politeness	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	120
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

Based on the spread of dots in Scatter Plot 2, it can be claimed that the assumptions of homoscedasticity, i.e. uniform spread of dots around the diagonal, and linearity were met. The spread of dots from the lower left to upper right corner of the plot indicated that the relationship between the two variables was positive and linear.

Figure 2. Relationship between politeness and introversion personality type

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study is marked by the fact that is there any relationship between politeness and learners' personality type. This study raises awareness of the need for early detection of students at risk of experiencing impoliteness. As the results of the study indicated there was significant relationship between both different kinds of personality types and politeness. As the results of the study revealed it can be predict that personality type has not any relationship with the politeness of the learners. According to what Meier (1997) argues that research in foreign and second language pedagogy should not rely on the Brown and Levinson theory of politeness to form the basis of teaching "politeness phenomena;" rather, there should be an attempt to raise cultural awareness. Similarly, Brown (2010) proposes a model for the study of politeness in second language learning and maintains that face and politeness should be analyzed as interactional and discursive processes. The author further argues that the way second language learners present themselves in the target community is directly influenced by pre-existing politeness ideologies. Specifically, Brown (2010) proposes that the learning of politeness in a second language is a process of "reframing", re-analyzing existing frames regarding the linguistic behavior that generally occurs in a certain context. One study that has attempted to investigate politeness in the second language context is Suh's (1999) examination of the

differences in the use of politeness strategies between English native speakers and ESL Korean learners. Findings revealed that though in most situations the Korean learners did not differ from the native speakers of English, in some situations such as intimate friendships, there were differences, probably as a result of cultural factors. Similarly, a number of studies have attempted to present findings from cross-cultural comparisons related to politeness and have generally concluded that cultural background is an important factor influencing choice of politeness strategies. For instance, Fukushima (1996) investigated the use of request strategies by speakers of Japanese and British English and concluded that there are differences in the types of strategies used by the two groups: the British use conventional forms and supportive acts whereas the Japanese are more direct. Similarly, Ebsworth and Kodama (2011) studied refusals by female native speakers of American English and Japanese and found several differences among the two groups; for instance, the Japanese often chose to postpone the refusal, while the Americans insisted on being honest. The Japanese participants also viewed some American refusals as impolite, while the Americans perceived the Japanese postponement as a problem.

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